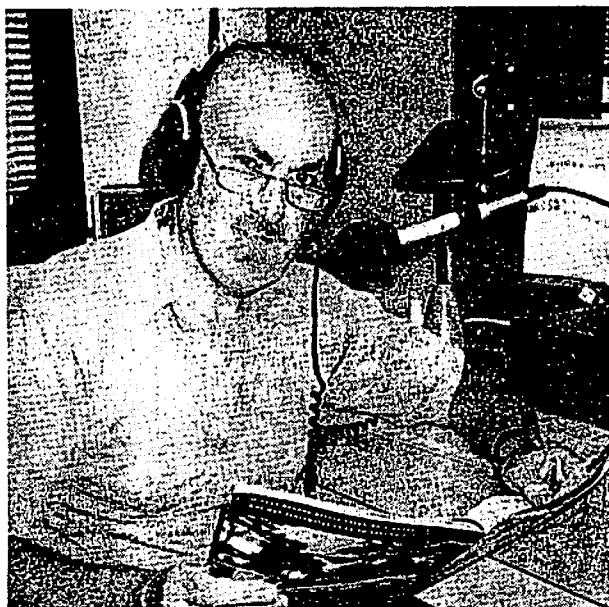


The Clipper Visits... Charles Tarbox

By JANICE NEUBAUER



Charles Tarbox, at the Talking Information Center studio in Marshfield, where he reads *Time Magazine* in a weekly radio program for the blind and visually impaired.

Perhaps you've heard a British voice on your radio – clipped and elegant, yet warm, with a touch of laughter – extolling the virtues of Cellular One. Or maybe you caught Channel 4's 30-second spots when Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson gave clues to the Friday Night Movies. If so, you have seen or heard Charles Tarbox in his new persona. His is now a life filled with casting calls, demo tapes, filmings and recording sessions.

He believes that people can live many lives in one lifetime. Although some believe life is too short. "I

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think life is very long and I think it's quite tiring. And I think you can live – and I have lived – several lives in this life. His latest life – after taking an early retirement from a 26-year corporate life as general director of communications for the insurance giant, John Hancock of Boston – is just about perfect. "I walk the beach every morning, I paint every day, and act when the opportunity presents itself." Painting is as much a passion for him as acting.

In fact, he has just returned to his home on Careswell Street from a trip to London for the formal presentation of the portrait he was commissioned to paint of Peter Such, the Mayor of Berkhamsted. In April it will be hung in the Town Hall with all due pomp and circumstance. Painting the official portrait of the mayor was a great honor to him because of his connection with Berkhamsted, a very old historic town in the south of England, where he lived for 5 years. It's the town where William the Conqueror was offered the crown of England and contains the ruins of the castle where that historic event took place.

"The biggest theatrical production I was ever involved in was in that town in that castle." In 1966 the town of Berkhamsted put on an extravagant production to celebrate its 900 years of history, a gigantic pageant in the ruins of the castle using townspeople as actors, 30 mounted horses and costumes borrowed from the English MGM studios. Tarbox, then in his mid 20's, was one of several producers. Each producer took a section, a period of history. His was the 14th century, the Black Prince section. "The Black Prince lived in Berkhamsted Castle, which is just rubble now, but picturesque rubble." Everything was prerecorded with a cast of actors, then played over loudspeakers and mimed by the townspeople who were playing the parts.

The spectacle ran for 2 weeks and played to 2,000 people a night. "The castle was packed. It was fabulous. It started in the daylight and finished in the dark. It went from the modern era back to William the Conqueror, so the last piece finished at night with William the Conqueror riding in on the horses with flaming torches." One of his co-producers was Peter Such, the man who was to become mayor of Berkhamsted in 1995.

The 2 had kept on friendly terms and Such, who knew that Tarbox did portraiture, commissioned him to do his official portrait. Tarbox flew over in September to take photographs of his subject, do some preliminary

sketches and decide, along with the mayor, how he wanted the portrait to look. They tried out a number of poses but finally decided on a standing pose in order to show the ceremonial robes to best advantage. The ceremonial function of an official is important in England, and the robes are consequently impressive, a deep red and trimmed with fur.

Ideally a portrait study would involve many sittings, but most people are not willing to take the time to sit for portraits. Tarbox will work from photographs but insists that he take the photos himself in natural light. For the mayor's portrait, he took 22 photographs at different angles with different lighting to get a subtlety of light and dark. He also took a lot of closeups. He worked for 2 months on the portrait and wore out 3 paint brushes. With great care, he carried the portrait to London in a large suitcase he had packed himself.

Although his style is tight and exact, there's still interpretation in it: the subject determines the way he paints. "Painting a portrait is interpretive like acting. You bring something of yourself to the part."

He does a lot of miniatures, which he finds useful in trying different likenesses without using a lot of paint. He enjoys painting miniatures - "another art form entirely."

Tarbox first learned to paint from his mother, a watercolorist, and remembers fondly the hours he and his mother would sit outside and paint together. His father, who was a major league sportsman (a famous cricketer in his day) taught him sports. He feels that without any conscious effort, they gave him balance.

As a young child during the Second World War, his playgrounds were often burnt out bomb sites. He remembers the bombings, picking up shrapnel in the street, watching dog fights in the sky, the spotlights searching and finally locking in on the planes, and his mother rushing him out to watch the flaming rockets. During one of the first air raids his family went to the shelters, but the experience was so bad they stayed in their home during the remainder of the bombings. Their greatest fear was unmanned rockets. If they went beyond London, they would hit.

His mother had a neighbor who had been involved in the evacuation of Dunkirk and in the Normandy invasion. Only in recent years had he talked of his war experiences. When Tarbox went over for the 50th anniversary of V-E Day he took this neighbor, then aged 79, to see the spitfires fly over the South of England in a "magnificently moving" demonstration. "I wanted to say a special thank you to him for being on the beaches for all of us."

As a young man he was a full-time student of commercial art in the Watford College of Technology and also trained in dance and acting. He is an associate of London's Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, and in addition taught drama at the local college in Hertfordshire. He was involved in the regional theater there, acting and producing and, what perhaps presaged

his portrait painting, studying and demonstrating theatrical make-up.

"I did all of that and I sort of moved through it. My life has been moving through things and then, selectively, back to them." He went on from being involved in dance and drama to business studies, graduating as a printing technologist and ended up a manager in a prestigious printing company in London. Even in that business, he found himself involved with art. The printing company he worked for did a lot of reproductions of paintings from the National Gallery.

"There was a lot of art work involved, but I wouldn't say what we were doing was artistic. The printing business is technological. I was very involved with the technology of printing and very interested in the history of printing, because print is a fascinating thing. It hasn't changed since the 1500's. Now it's completely gone. No letter press, no typesetting, none of things which were there when I was in the business, all superseded by new technology. Up to then it had been an unbroken thread right from Gutenberg when he invented movable type. Suddenly that life ended."

Coincidentally, that was just about the time that his life as a printer ended when he and his wife Elizabeth, now a Unitarian-Universalist minister, emigrated to the United States in 1968. The printing industry was no longer the same industry he had known. Seeking a new career, he very quickly joined Hancock in Boston. Within a year, he got into the advertising side of the company and for years was general director of advertising there.

He loved advertising and became fascinated by the research and by television. He especially loved working on television commercials, which took him often to New York and Los Angeles. That's what eventually got him back into acting. He tells of his frustration at standing behind the camera watching actors botch up scenes when he knew he could do better. "And of course I was always itching to start directing. As the client, you could pass along suggestions, but although you were paying the bill, you had to be very diplomatic."

About 10 years ago, the move toward corporate downsizing, combined with his own desire for early retirement, created the impetus to start exploring an acting career. It takes time and hard work to break into the acting profession. He sought the advice of "an absolutely, fabulously creative producer" with whom he had worked on Hancock commercials. "I said to him, 'I really would like to get back into acting. I've never been in commercial acting. Do you think I'm crazy?' and he said 'No, you're not crazy. You'd be very good.' and offered to help me put together a demonstration tape."

His next step, getting into the actors' unions, was difficult. "You can't get into the union unless you're working and you can't work unless you're in the union, one of those catch 22 things, particularly with the Screen Actors Guild. As soon as he could, he joined AFTRA (American Federation of Radio and Television Artists) and then got very lucky. About 2 years later he

was asked to do a commercial for World News Monitor and within a month and a half they wanted him back for another one. A producer can waive the union requirement only once. In order to use him again, the producer added a letter to the Screen Actors Guild application telling them that he needed to use the actor again for a similar commercial, a voice over for television.

As a member of SAG, he was able to do the Sherlock Holmes Channel 4 promotion. Channel 4 had used him before – he had done the promotions for Letterman's trip to London – so they called him for the Friday Night Movies promotion, which ran for 11 weeks. They filmed



Charles Tarbox (l) presenting Mayoral Portrait to Peter Such, Mayor of Berkhamsted, England at the Kensington Palace Hotel in London.

the series in 9-1/4 hours and used Milton Academy as the set.

He was able to schedule his commercial work during lunchtimes, but often had to take vacation days from work for filming sessions. He knew now that he truly wanted to do this, so considered it well worth using vacation time. Now retired for 2 years, he's pleased with the way his acting career has built. He does both radio and television work and many corporate films, called "industrials." The latter are never seen by anyone but the target audience.

He turned down the opportunity to be in the Boston revival of the Agatha Christie play, *The Mousetrap*, which ran last winter. Thinking back on the weather, Tarbox says emphatically with a laugh, "Was I right! I had just retired, just got out of having to drive the expressway every day to Boston." He also admits some nervousness about whether he could still remember lines. He has a few regrets about this decision and leaves open the possibility he may yet be tempted to return to live theater should the opportunity again arise.

Because he is not driven to be "known," he is free from the pressures that torment many actors. "I was driven to get promotions in corporate life. Now the pressure's off. I just enjoy acting enormously. You meet some wonderful people." He describes coming back from shopping, finding a message on his telephone machine asking him to come up to audition the next day. "And

it's fun really. If you get it, wonderful. And if you don't, you've had a nice day in Boston and you've met a few fellow actors."

His experience in advertising has given him this equanimity. He advises actors not to take the rejection of casting sessions to heart "as long as you can say 'I did a good audition.' You have to know that it goes through the advertising agency, the producer, perhaps even the client, and you're competing with many people. It's just whether you fit. But it is very important you have enough ego to be able to say 'It's ok' but not enough ego to be destroyed by it." He says radio is easier: if they call you, they've already heard your tape and want to book you. "You might be getting rejected every day and you never know!"

His new career is turning him back to some bad habits. He got a call from a casting agency to come for an audition and bring a cigar. All the actors had to do was put on a variety of expressions while smoking a cigar. He didn't get the part, but is now smoking cigars again, which he had given up years ago.

Marketing is essential to a professional career. "Acting is very entrepreneurial. If you want to work you really have to merchandise yourself." He sends out a cup with his photograph on it to everybody he has worked for, which is expensive. "But if the cups stay on their desks, they've got your picture, they remember you, they've got what you do and they've got your phone number." Periodically he sends out new audio tapes and updates his video demos. He changes his photograph every 4 years in the major casting book of the industry.

He volunteers for the Talking Information Center (TIC), radio for the blind and visually impaired. Following his own conviction that people should not volunteer to do something they hate, he does what he loves and what he is best at – reading.

In his Duxbury home, where he has lived for 20 years, he is surrounded by art, including original watercolors of 19th century English landscapes.

His basement family room has what he laughingly calls his "ego wall" lined with large framed photographs of him with Charlton Heston, F. Lee Bailey, Arthur Fiedler, James Mason, Carol Channing, John Williams, Rosemary Clooney, and others – some of the celebrities he worked with during a radio program he instituted as a corporate public relations project. In the 9 years the program aired over a classical musical station, he met a lot of interesting people and his drawers were full of photographs.

Other walls display photographs of the restoration of the Wang Center. He was active, on behalf of Hancock, in the 10 million dollar fundraising campaign that made possible the successful restoration of that lovely, historic theater.

While he keeps his ties with England (he visits at least twice a year) he considers himself very much an American and is annoyed when people hearing his accent assume he is a visitor. Current negativity directed at immigrants upset him with its unfairness. He feels that his own family's contributions to this country have been positive.

"To paraphrase Noel Coward, 'America's been very good to us, but then we've been good to America.' I know I've been productive in my years as a citizen. Elizabeth, as a minister, is certainly being of service, and once our daughter Sarah finishes at Brandeis, where she is a psychology major, I'm certain she will use her special gifts."